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Deal sets path for biotech boom

Leggett: Agreement with Hopkins is 'only the beginning'

by Sebastian Montes | Staff Writer

With the stroke of a pen last week, county officials and bioscience leaders embarked on a decades-long effort to transform the kind of science in Montgomery, and the way government, academic institutions and the private sector collaborate in trying to bring that about.

County Executive Isiah Leggett and Johns Hopkins University president Ronald J. Daniels signed a Memorandum of Understanding Feb. 24 that reaffirms and deepens a "shared vision" to revitalize and redefine development of life science over the next several decades.

They inked the agreement shortly after the National Cancer Institute — now located in North Bethesda — announced a \$200 million project to build a pair of seven-story towers housing 2,100 employees on 9 acres of Hopkins's Rockville campus.

The university will identify areas of research and technology transfer while the county will tailor its economic development strategy to draw companies that will compliment that focus, Leggett said. That will coincide with a push to redefine the county's relationship with its vast scientific assets — the National Institutes of Health, the Food and Drug Administration, the National Institute of Standards and Technology, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Johns Hopkins, the Universities at Shady Grove and Montgomery College.

"We need to link our assets to realize the enormous potential that they offer to make Montgomery County a community of innovation not only for the next 30 years but in perpetuity," Leggett said at the MOU signing at Hopkins's Rockville campus. "...This collaboration is only the beginning."

The county is working on a similar MOU with the University System of Maryland — which County Councilman Michael J. Knapp believes could "have more tangible activities to bring in the short-term" at the Universities at Shady Grove. County leaders met last week with top officials at NIH and FDA.

Knapp (D-Dist. 2) of Germantown proposed a tax credit for biotech companies last month. And county leaders are working with lawmakers in Annapolis to cement the state's biotech investment credit before it lapses in 2012.

The effort is being steered by the county's BioScience Strategy, rolled out in December, which places a premium on translating research into commercial products, streamlining the county's development review and permitting process and launching a "high-profile marketing effort" to thrust Montgomery County into the international forefront.

But a growing number of civic activists and environmental groups remain wary of the impact, especially of the Gaithersburg West master plan, the draft of which calls for tripling the Shady Grove Life Sciences Center to 20 million square feet of commercial space, up to 60,000 jobs and roughly 9,000 residences over the next 40 years.

The Silver Spring Advisory Board, the Montgomery County Group of the Sierra Club, and the East County Citizen's Advisory Board have recently taken up that outcry out of concern that Science City, as envisioned, will eat up more than its fair share of growth potential.

Critics' ire falls largely on Hopkins's 107-acre Belward farm at Gaithersburg's southern edge, where Gaithersburg West would allow 4.5 million square feet of research, laboratory and office space.

Hopkins says it needs another 2 million square feet to attract a major federal institution such as NIH.

That hesitation over Gaithersburg West was echoed Monday night at a special meeting of the mayors and councils of Gaithersburg and Rockville, who called on the County Council to redo analyses of Science City's traffic and transportation assumptions and its economic impact.

The council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development has been reviewing Gaithersburg West for more than four months. The plan isn't expected to reach the full council until mid-April.

Read Montgomery County's

Biosciences Strategy at www.gazette.net/links.

Gaithersburg, Rockville leaders urge County Council to redo traffic, economic analyses of "Science City."